

Graduate Assistants Matter Too

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As advisors, we can often feel like ours are thankless jobs. We work long hours, and give our all to our students – sometimes in the form of literal blood, sweat, and tears. We care deeply about our students, their experiences as fraternity/sorority members, their learning and development, and their overall wellbeing. Our jobs are equal parts challenging and rewarding, and balancing those pieces can be a full time job in itself. This sounds daunting for anyone, but what about the advisors who are students too? How do their experiences as advisors complement their continuing studies? How are they growing and developing? How do they matter?

Graduate assistants are integral members of many fraternity/sorority life teams. Most graduate assistants work roughly 20 hours a week, in exchange for a stipend and/or tuition remission. However, like many other student affairs professionals, we often are not able to “turn off” our responsibilities to our students and their learning just because we have hit our hour mark for the week. In many instances, graduate assistants are ultimately responsible for advising at least one council, as well as implementing other types of programming, such as new member education or leadership retreats. This is on top of our academic courses; many programs are full time, which for some students can require upwards of 12 credit hours per semester. This says nothing of our responsibilities outside of work and school. Many of you reading this may remember what this process was like, but for those of you who do not remember or did not hold an assistantship – it is utterly exhausting.

At this point, you may be wondering: “Why do we employ graduate assistants at all? Aren’t we doing a disservice to their learning by putting all these pressures on them?” While it may seem like a lot to ask, I strongly believe that graduate assistants are imperative to a fully functioning fraternity/sorority life staff. Graduate assistants can bring a different, fresh perspective to a community. For some undergraduate students, graduate assistants may be less intimidating and more accessible. Additionally, graduate students who are coming back to school after spending time in the professional world may bring different experiences to contribute to the team, which can influence and update our practice in innovative ways.

So how can professionals support the graduate students in their lives? First, a strong supervisory relationship is key. Adopting a synergistic model can be incredibly helpful, and I cannot overstate how important regular one-on-one meetings are. Synergistic supervision has a “dual focus on [the] accomplishment of the organization’s goals and support of staff in accomplishment of their personal and professional goals” (Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004, p.117). Within synergistic supervision, there is a focus on “joint effort, two-way communication, competence, growth orientation, proactivity, goal-based, systematic and ongoing processes, and holism” (Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004, p.117). Graduate students need space to be students themselves – they spend so much time and energy worrying about the undergraduates they work with, they may forget that they deserve to be worried about too. In one-on-one meetings, ask your graduate assistant how classes are going. Maybe you will be able to help them with a class project, or give them new perspective on a personal issue. Additionally, making it clear to your graduate assistant that you care about their personal and professional development is key! We know that “professional development is a critical and often overlooked outcome of supervisory

relationships” (Tull, Hirt, & Saunders, 2009), and this is especially true for graduate assistants (p. 140). Supporting them in attending conferences, like the Annual Meeting, goes a long way. If that is not an option, offer to review resumes and cover letters, go over interview skills, and connect graduate assistants with your colleagues on your campus and elsewhere. Knowing that their supervisor has their best interests in mind can really help a graduate student feel productive, useful, and impactful.

Another important way to support graduate students is through the lens of student development theory. While not all graduate students come straight out of their undergraduate experience, they are all students and in many ways have similar experiences to undergraduate students. Discussing student development theory in light of their own experiences and behaviors, as well as how to act on this information, can help graduate assistants understand how to put theory into practice with the students they work with. This will be especially helpful if they are in a program that is not focused on higher education or student affairs. It is also important for you as the supervisor or professional to remember that graduate assistants have many competing priorities. Being flexible and understanding throughout each semester will help ensure your graduate assistant is able to be more meaningful for your students and the fraternity/sorority community as a whole. Most importantly, ask your graduate assistant what they need. We are all individuals with specific goals, and one size does not fit all when it comes to supporting GAs.

Graduate assistants matter. They play an important role in the work we do as fraternity and sorority advisors. Moreover, the development of graduate assistants is necessary as they are the professionals of tomorrow; making sure that they have a solid, supportive start will help minimize burnout at the graduate level, and ensure they enter their first professional jobs as effective and prepared educators.

References

- Magolda, P. M., & Carnaghi, J. E. (Eds.). (2004). *Job one: Experiences of new professionals in student affairs*. Layham, MD: American College Personnel Association.
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